

technical and political context of the early days following a sudden impact natural disaster; and (b) stress the most vital role of assessment of need and surveillance for proper disaster relief management. Both slides and simulation exercise will be available to universities and schools of public health interested in including disaster and refugee medicine in their curriculum.

PAHO's Response to Recent Disasters

In recent years, PAHO has been called upon more frequently to participate in emergency relief operations, especially when natural or other disasters have created threats to public health.

PAHO emergency assistance is available to a government of a disaster-stricken country, provided a genuine emergency exists and national or other international resources are not sufficient or not available in practice to meet the immediate health needs. PAHO aid has traditionally consisted of the provision of specialized medical supplies or equipment and technical assistance on specific public health problems, such as the prevention of communicable disease outbreaks, the establishment of an emergency potable water supply, vector control, the restoration of medical services, etc.

Emergency technical cooperation management of disaster relief is provided to the Ministry of Health of the disaster-stricken country. Interested countries are invited to sign a formal agreement with PAHO in order to permit the immediate dispatch of a team of professionals to assist in the coordination of assistance, assessment of needs and specific technical tasks.

The United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO)

Dr. İlhan Lütem

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, several major disasters occurred in rapid succession. The most devastating of them was no doubt the earthquake in Peru in 1970, which claimed some 50,000 lives and caused untold damage and destruction in that country.

Experience in these, and indeed in other disasters, made it clear that much of the generous aid provided by the international community in the wake of these disasters was, in the absence of co-ordination, often wasted or did not correspond to the real needs of victims. Enormous quantities of goods, some of them quite unsuitable, would pour in, together with countless well-meaning individuals wishing to help. Unfortunately, many of them were more hindrance than help. Obviously, some order had to be created to rectify this haphazard approach, and to ensure that relief supplies of the right kind and in appropriate quantities would reach the survivors rapidly to cover their basic and most urgent requirements during the emergency period.

This, then, was the main purpose for which UNDRO was set up. However, this resolution of the General Assembly that authorized the establishment of the Office did not limit UNDRO's role solely to the co-ordination of international relief after a disaster. The Office was also entrusted with the associated tasks of *pre-disaster* planning, preparedness, and prevention. Preparedness for disasters can considerably improve the relief response itself.

It is UNDRO's responsibility to ensure that in the event of a disaster the relief activities of all potential donors—governments and public or private institutions—are mobilized and co-ordinated so as to respond to the needs of the stricken country in the speediest and most effective manner. In the words of the Assembly's Resolution, the Co-ordinator is required—and I quote—"to mobilize, direct and co-ordinate the relief activities of the

From the office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO). (1) UNDRO Liaison Office, United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA. (2) U.N. Headquarters, Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland. (Telephone: 22-310211.)

various organizations of the United Nations system in response to a request for disaster assistance from a stricken State" and "to co-ordinate United Nations assistance with assistance given by intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions, in particular by the international Red Cross."

How do we approach this task which presents, as I am sure must be clear to you, formidable difficulties? First, I should perhaps explain that the Resident Representatives of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the field—that is, in some 100 developing countries—also act as UNDRO's representatives in the country of their assignment. When disaster strikes, their first duty is to ascertain as far as possible the nature and extent of the disaster, the number of victims, the immediate relief requirements, the resources available locally to satisfy them, and whether the government wishes to request international assistance. Almost invariably, and always in the case of a major disaster, or when the local UNDP office does not have sufficient resources, members of UNDRO's own staff are sent from Geneva to assist in the assessment of relief requirements, so that we may help the Government and the local representatives of the donor Community first to assess the needs and then to try to ensure their supply.

In Geneva, as soon as news of a disaster reaches UNDRO, either the Resident Representative or, as is often the case, through news agency messages, a whole machinery is set in motion through the UNDRO Co-ordination Centre. The Centre is fully equipped with modern communications facilities, and a Duty Officer is permanently on call. UNDRO can thus remain in constant contact with the disaster site and at the same time keep donors informed of the changing situation and needs. Once a reasonably detailed first list of requirements is established the computer controlled telex system enables its rapid transmission, in the form of a situation report, to a number of possible donors. In the event of a major disaster, there may be as many as one hundred addresses of these reports. Using the UNDRO lists, the donors in turn inform us which items they are able to offer, or of any other measures they may be proposing to take. As the relief operation proceeds, new and updated situation reports are issued giving the current status of requirements. By these means, donors can continue to fill any gaps, and duplication of supplies can largely be avoided.

This system, simple though it may sound, took a fairly long time to establish. UNDRO had to obtain the co-operation of members of the international community who had hitherto acted individually: we were asking them not only

to take account of the information we supplied, but also to inform UNDRO of what they will be doing so that concerted action could be ensured. I will not say that today things are perfect—far from it. Donors, especially governments, do not always remember to inform us of the relief they are supplying. Also, a considerable number of private donors, not affiliated with any organization, often take initiatives without consulting anyone, with the result that serious problems in logistics are created.

Some donors prefer to channel their assistance through UNDRO rather than engage themselves in a relief operation for which they may not necessarily have the required experience. Very often, too, we have to assist in obtaining free, or reduced rate, air transport to get the goods rapidly to where they are needed. Resolution 200 of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) allows air companies, at their discretion, to carry relief supplies free of charge. Needless to say, we have taken full advantage of this facility, and I should like to take this opportunity to thank the many airline companies who have co-operated with us for their generous assistance.

Apart from the activities of mobilizing and co-ordinating assistance supplied by others, the Office can also give limited, but nonetheless useful, direct assistance. The sum of \$360,000 is available each year for cash allocations to stricken countries, up to a maximum of \$30,000 for any one disaster. This is, of course, an extremely modest amount in the face of the extensive needs generated by a disaster, but it does act as a token of international solidarity and sympathy and allows us to provide some of the most urgently needed items, pending the arrival of the main supplies of international assistance.

I have so far given you a rather schematic account of our activities. However, as you can no doubt imagine, there are many factors which we simply cannot control. Not the least of these is the reluctance of some governments to make an official request for international assistance. Thus, in fulfilling our functions, a certain amount of diplomacy has to be exercised since, in principle, we can only intervene in the case of disaster if a country so requests. Some governments let it be known that spontaneous offers of assistance would be welcome, but are strongly opposed to our launching an official appeal to the international community. That of course does not prevent the international community from bombarding us at the same time with questions on the disaster which has just occurred, nor of criticizing when they consider our reaction to be inadequate or too slow. In a case like this, we nevertheless continue to pass on to potential donors whatever information we do have concerning the disaster, and the probable relief

needs. I hope, as time goes on, that it will be possible to avoid such difficulties—which still occur all too frequently—as UNDRO's role and capabilities become better and more widely understood. We are striving to make the governments of disaster-prone countries more fully aware of the flexibility with which UNDRO can respond to calls for assistance, whether or not the country concerned wishes an appeal to be made to the international community.

Disaster Assistance by Department of State, USA

Joyce A. Brooks

The Agency for International Development (AID) of the U.S. Department of State administers most U.S. bilateral foreign aid for development. The AID Administrator is the President's Special Coordinator for International Disaster Assistance. The Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) coordinates all U.S. Government assistance to help alleviate suffering of people affected or threatened by natural or manmade disasters that occur abroad. Persons in developing countries are the main beneficiaries of the program. In addition to providing emergency relief, AID's disaster assistance program aims to strengthen the capabilities of other governments to respond to disasters. It is hoped that such efforts will help decrease dependence on the donor community.

OFDA response to disasters takes place only at the request of a foreign government to the U.S. Ambassador in the affected area. The Ambassador must then declare the existence of a situation warranting U.S. Government assistance. Once that disaster declaration has been made, he/she has the use of up to \$25,000 which may be used as a donation or as a vehicle to purchase locally-available supplies to aid in relief efforts. Any amount above \$25,000 must be approved by the OFDA.

The Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance consists of (1) the Operations Division and (2) the Preparedness and Planning Division. The Operations Division is directly involved with disaster relief response in its emergency and rehabilitation phases. The Preparedness and Planning Division helps countries prepare for disasters through such mechanisms as regional disaster preparedness seminars; technical assistance activities ranging from seismic monitoring and crop forecasting, storm and hurricane prediction and warning; to the design of technical and instructional materials, advice on national preparedness plans, and the talents of experts in various disaster-related fields. Approximately \$3.7 million was allocated for prepared-

From the Office of USA Foreign Disaster Assistance, Agency for International Development, Department of State, Washington, DC 20523, USA.